

*Tehura*

*On viewing Gauguin's Mana'o Tupapa'u (The Spirit of the Dead Keeps Watch)*

Brandy Nālani McDougall

The chill of violet around you,  
*Olympia* of Oceania, you lie pito down:  
 a burnished, brown body like mine, draped  
 over white sheets. And for the moment,  
 I can't move—How did we get here?  
 Your framed face turning toward mine,  
 I see a pleading in your eyes, on your lips  
 a moan of dread.

*Quickly, I struck a match, and I saw . . .*  
*Tehura, immobile, naked, lying face downward flat on the bed*  
*with the eyes inordinately large with fear.*

I draw closer to you, mounted on the wall—

*Never had I seen her so beautiful, so tremulously beautiful*

see waves of dark hair tucked  
behind your delicate ear, pulled  
violently from your face, neck.  
Your seduction rendered  
through brush strokes of bronze:  
arching your back, lifting your chin to meet  
a ceaseless stare.

*She . . . seemed not to recognize me. As for myself  
I stood for some moments strangely uncertain*

Behind you, the spirit of the dead,

*in this half-light which was surely peopled for her with dangerous apparitions*

more his than yours, looms in black, stares—

*I was afraid to make any movement . . . Might she not . . . take me for one of the  
Tupapaūs?*

blankly, unbending. In its hand,  
the spark of a bud lights the tiaras  
on your mattress, each blossom opening  
into a glorious sneer.

*. . . and the night was soft, soft and ardent, a night of the tropics . . .*

Tehura, my poki`i,  
in your face I see my own,  
the same curves and shadow twisting  
into a sad silence. I know  
this is not who we are, not Why or How—

only smoke from flailing ghosts, tricks  
of fading light, only the wash of gold paint over  
this rotting wood frame.

Note: Italicized lines are excerpts from Paul Gauguin's autobiography, *Noa Noa: The Tahitian Journal*, translated by O F Theis (New York: Dover Publications, 1985, pages 33–34).

Hailing from Upcountry Maui, BRANDY NĀLANI MCDOUGALL, a 1994 Kamehameha Schools graduate, completed her MFA in poetry from the University of Oregon in 2001 and obtained a Fulbright Study Award (Aotearoa/New Zealand) in 2002. An award-winning poet, McDougall's work has been published in journals and anthologies throughout Hawai'i, the continental United States, and the Pacific. Her first collection will be released in 2007. Currently pursuing a PhD in English from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, McDougall works as an assistant editor for Kuleana 'Ōiwi Press, the publisher of *'Ōiwi: A Native Hawaiian Journal*.